

VINEYARD  
  
GAZETTE

Friday, December 31, 2010

## **Eleanor Pearlson, 89, Trailblazer in Women's Rights, Business**



Eleanor Pearlson

Eleanor D. Pearlson, the realty firm Tea Lane Associates' cofounder who personally helped thousands of people to fall in love with the Island and sink roots here, died peacefully at her home in Chilmark on Dec. 22. She was 89

A trailblazer for women's rights, Eleanor was a larger-than-life personality, committed to both liberal social causes and the wheelings and dealings of real estate. Many contradictory things have been said about her, most of them true. She was known equally for her generosity and her strong will, her enthusiasm and her temper, her warmth and her keen business sense. She might greet you or grill you, but chances were if you needed help with something on Martha's Vineyard, she had the answer. Whether it was finding a job, buying the perfect property or starting a business, Eleanor was in the know. And she didn't hesitate to offer her advice with or without a request.

The matriarch of Tea Lane Associates, born June 9, 1921, in Cambridge, wasn't always so self-assured. In an interview by Marjorie Potts in 2006 to celebrate 40 years in real estate on Martha's Vineyard, Eleanor shared some of her colorful history. "I was born at 1195 Cambridge street," Eleanor recalled, "to first-generation parents who slaved away. They had a 24-hour grocery store, open seven days. It was downstairs, we lived upstairs."

It was grim. She helped out growing up, but it wasn't where she wanted to be. Despite her family's poverty and the depression of the 1930s, she managed to go to Boston University, graduating in 1942 with a degree in economics.

She didn't have to go far to look for a job, it was World War II.

"I wanted to escape the poverty of the slum area, so I went down to Causeway Street, where the Navy was recruiting. I was one of the first WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service] they took."

The Navy sent her to Smith College for training, which she called the "best time of my life. The other women there had come from business, they were high powered, many in their late thirties, and here I was in my early twenties. I was a babe, wet behind the ears." (Although it was impressive for a woman of no means to get her college degree at that time.)

Smith had a gorgeous campus; it was a luxurious place for a young woman to be, and Eleanor thrived. She graduated from the course a midshipman. Her first assignment after Smith was the Naval Air Base at Newport, another top spot.

"It was beautiful, great, the country club of the East. I had a wonderful time there."

Her tour was in Hawaii, at the Naval Air Station in Kaneohe. "One of the nicest spots you could ever be in." She decoded messages from ships in the Pacific. She also remembered becoming head of the entertainment for the base, running the bachelor officers' quarters. "I was in charge of everything for a thousand naval officers who came back from these missions. Food, music, dancing, parties every night."

Even more exciting, the Navy taught her to drive a car. "Where would a poor girl get a car," she said, clearly enthused by the military. "If there is no war, it's a great training."

Promoted by the war's end, she was Lieut. Eleanor Pearlson, Senior Grade.

At the end, she applied to get out. "Everyone thought I was crazy, I could have gone up in rank, and in pay, but it was time for a new experience."

Eleanor had some regrets. "I should have gone into public service, should have been in Washington, in politics."

The military's loss was Manhattan's gain. For the next 20 plus years, Eleanor proceeded to live a most meaningful life in New York city. Her roles included:

- Member of management of the Mutual Broadcasting System, a radio network with over 500 affiliates including New York's WOR.
- Executive secretary of the Women's Trade Union League, which played a key role in helping to improve conditions for working women in the first half of the twentieth century. Members included Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Dreier sisters, Mary and Margaret, aunts to the Dreier family of Seven Gates on Martha's Vineyard.
- Director of women's operations for the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, a major charitable organization to help European immigrants with 116 affiliates.
- Executive secretary for Henry Street Settlement which offered community services on the Lower East Side.

While fund-raising and recruiting board members for Henry Street Settlement, Eleanor met Julia. Julia Green Sturges came from a cultured, educated family; she was a woman involved in helping children. Arts for Living was a program she created at the settlement house. She was the perfect board member for a nonprofit.

Perfect until there was a long strike, 13 weeks, and Eleanor, whose heart was with the workers, wasn't supposed to cross the line because she was management.

"We were trying to get information for the friends on the picket line, and Julia, as a board member, was able to smuggle it out to me. We were terrified they'd find us, running around exchanging this information in secret. That was a very scary period of our lives."

Ultimately the strikers lost. Eleanor recounted that Julia was fired from the board when they found out on whose side she was. Eleanor left as well, at the end of 1966.

In June 1967, she and Julia moved to Martha's Vineyard, bought their first house in Chilmark on Tea Lane and figured establishing a small real estate agency would be a simple and civilized pursuit. Yet purchasing a large piece of Chilmark property with the goal of subdividing turned out to be more daunting than fighting for the rights of women, laborers and the impoverished.

"It was a 30-year struggle," she said, actually laughing. She wasn't laughing then.

"I thought this was America, if you wanted to open up a grocery store, you did. But it was not America," in her view. She and Julia felt that people didn't know how to take them, that they were doing something "that was not average. We were two women in real estate. We didn't feel welcomed."

The Island was also reeling from a proposal that had been made in the early 70s by Senator Edward Kennedy to make Martha's Vineyard "forever wild," limiting further development, making the Island a kind of national park. Many believe that this possibility caused town boards to introduce zoning and to start planning, keeping these decisions from being determined federally.

Into this came Eleanor and Julia with their own plan, possibly the first subdivision presented in Chilmark, drawn up by experts that they felt were the very best, architects and planners such as James S. Polshek and Peter Hornblower. "These were men of the future, visionaries who believed in cluster housing and the social responsibility of architecture and planning." It was, she said, very beautiful, allowing for open space, for trails

and a variety of houses on different sized lots. But the town had its concerns about population density. The issues were complicated. It became a legal and financial nightmare for the Tea Lane women, but they did not retreat.

One of the positive and unexpected outcomes was the creation of the Martha's Vineyard Land Bank's Waskosim's Rock Reservation, a large nature and walking preserve, off of North Road. Tea Lane Associates slowly became a successful part of the Island business community. The business grew by word of mouth; their customers were, Eleanor said, "not always famous people, but nice people." Many had become their friends.

Eleanor cultivated a team at Tea Lane Associates who were like her family, each with different strengths and styles but all with a fierce loyalty and love for their leader. She kept everyone challenged and on their feet with her booming voice, eclectic vocabulary and her consistent use of Yiddish. As a matter of fact, there is a large population on the Island who has learned a good number of words and expressions in Yiddish from Eleanor.

Although Eleanor did not like to talk about it, she battled cancer on and off for 30 years. She was able to beat it again and again with her singular determination. This gave many Islanders great inspiration and hope.

Eleanor left a community of family, friends and neighbors who are all wondering what the world will be like without her. She was a dramatic character who made any action even as simple as going out for breakfast (a favorite task) a major event. People both on and off Island appreciated her spunk and her fire. She was indomitable — an old leftie, a fighter for social justice, and a free market business woman. So many people have many wonderful and vivid memories, as well as the great privilege and joy of sharing stories of Eleanor which will continue for a very long time.

Eleanor is survived by sister Frieda Rabinovitz and her husband, Jason Rabinovitz; brother Paul A. Pearlson, and his wife, Margaret A. Pearlson; nieces Abby Rabinovitz (and her husband Richard Stuart), Eva Henry, Judy Rabinovitz, Leslie D. Pearlson and Elizabeth A. Pearlson (and her husband Marco Constant and their daughter Saldanha Constant); and her nephews Daniel Rabinovitz (and his wife Effie Chan and their daughter Callie Rabinovitz and son Josh Rabinovitz) and Jonathan Rabinovitz (and his son Conor Rabinovitz and daughter Eleanor "Tia" Rabinovitz). She was predeceased by her lifelong companion, Julia, and by her sister Jeanne Henry (and her husband Warren Henry). Eleanor also leaves her two devoted caregivers, Elaine King and Thenzel Thomas.

Services were held yesterday at the Martha's Vineyard Hebrew Center. Eleanor's family requests that gifts in her memory be made in lieu of flowers to the Vineyard Nursing Association, P.O. Box 399, Vineyard Haven, Mass. 02568.